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## Urban vulnerabilities

In March and April 2020, social media and news were awash with images of wildlife in cities under lockdown. As city residents sheltered in their homes, other less likely urban dwellers ventured out onto the streets. Dolphins and swans returned to seemingly crystal clear canals in Venice. Deer frolicked in the streets of Nara prefecture in Japan. Macaques roamed the streets in large crowds in Lopburi, Thailand. Residents reported wild boar in Berlin, coyotes in San Francisco and mountain lions in Santiago (Figure 1).

With a sense of awe, many saw 'nature' recovering, 'finding its way' amid tremendous human suffering. Although some of these stories turned out to be fabricated (as was the case with the dolphins in Venice), they do capture a 'weedy' reality that has long existed in the cracks of urban life. With growing urban sprawl, deforestation, rising global temperatures and the consolidation of farmland, many animals and plants gradually make the city their new home. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, reductions in human traffic indeed have had initial, unexpected effects: deprived of their usual anthropogenic food sources, provided by tourists and other urban dwellers, many animals have begun to change their behaviour, moving further into city centres during unusual daytime hours or more aggressively fighting over their prey. Meanwhile, carbon monoxide levels in cities such as Los Angeles and Beijing



**Figure 1.** Wild boar piglets crossing a sidewalk in Berlin. Photo courtesy of Florian Moellers. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

have decreased significantly for the first time in decades. In the face of these unintended consequences, who would not find glimpses of hope for nature's resilience amid destruction and viral disaster?

In Europe, the pandemic has primarily been discussed as a public health and an economic problem. Yet it is also an ecological one. While the detailed pathways that have led COVID-19 to cross the species boundary (possibly from bats to pangolins to humans) still need to be determined, it is clear that industrial agriculture and factory farming, as well as the destruction of wildlife habitats via deforestation and urbanisation, have accelerated pathogen transmission from animals to humans and thus contribute to the spread of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19. Humans, viruses and animals (both domestic and wild) have co-evolved in a deadly dance. And this dance is more deadly for some than for others.

The proliferation of COVID-19 has already begun to deepen existing racial, class and gender inequalities, disproportionately affecting working class and communities of colour who often do not have access to adequate healthcare or suffer from 'pre-existing medical conditions' due to environmental pollution. As the mobile and privileged carry the virus across the globe and flee to their vacation homes, those who cannot easily take shelter – cashiers, grocery sellers, truck drivers, meatpackers, farm- and careworkers, but also refugees, the homeless and prisoners – are most exposed and vulnerable. While the air may be clearing momentarily, many people struggle to breathe not only because of the virus, but also because of engrained structures of racial violence and injustice.

Celebrating nature's resilience runs risk of absolving humans from collaborating with each other and other living beings to rebuild urban worlds. Similarly, adhering to grand narratives about humans as destructive (see slogans such as 'humans are the virus') does not account for the ways in which marginalised communities are criminalised and often blamed for the spread of disease. Rather, it is time to shift focus toward the broader social, ecological and economic formations that impact who lives and dies in today's cities. Perhaps then, the crisp blue skies, and the wild boar and deer roaming the streets can be a guide: for being accountable to the unequal ways in which different bodies, both human and nonhuman, become vulnerable. After all, such accountability might be a first step toward forging new forms of care and building more liveable worlds.

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